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Remembering Afghanistan's Golden Age

By Elisabeth Bumiller

WASHINGTON — From presidential confidants in the White House Situation Room to anchors on cable television to ruminators at the city's think tanks, the view has settled in: Afghanistan is an ungovernable collection of tribes that has confounded every conqueror since Alexander the Great. Like a lot of received wisdom, it may well be correct.

But as President Obama debates whether to send more American troops to Afghanistan, and whether, more pointedly, he might be sending them down a black hole of civic hopelessness, American and Afghan scholars and diplomats say it is worth recalling four decades in the country's recent history, from the 1930s to the 1970s, when there was a semblance of a national government and Kabul was known as "the Paris of Central Asia."

Afghans and Americans alike describe the country in those days as a poor nation, but one that built national roads, stood up an army and defended its borders. As a monarchy and then a constitutional monarchy, there was relative stability and by the 1960s a brief era of modernity and democratic reform. Afghan women not only attended Kabul University, they did so in miniskirts. Visitors tourists, hippies, Indians, Pakistanis, adventurers, were stunned by the beauty of the city's gardens and the snow-capped mountains that surround the capital.

"I lived in Afghanistan when it was very governable, from 1964 to 1974," said Thomas E. Gouttierre, director of the Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska, Omaha, who met recently in Kabul with Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the top NATO commander in Afghanistan. Mr. Gouttierre, who spent his decade in the country as a Peace Corps volunteer, a Fulbright scholar and the national basketball team's coach, said, "I've always thought it was one of the most beautiful places in the world."

Afghans today say that the view of their country as an ungovernable "graveyard of empires" is condescending and uninformed. "Unfortunately, we have a lot of overnight experts on Afghanistan right now," said Said Tayeb Jawad, the Afghan ambassador to Washington. "You turn to any TV channel and they are experts on Afghan ethnicities, tribal issues and history without having been to Afghanistan or read one or two books."

"Afghanistan," Mr. Jawad asserted, "is less tribal than New York."

Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American and the former American ambassador to Afghanistan who grew up in Kabul and the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif, said that calling a country ungovernable was a standard reaction when Americans do not want to engage in a conflict, like Iraq or the Balkans. The response, he said, is articulated as, “We were wrong to have the objectives that we had because this place is unhelpable, they’ve been at war for a thousand years, who the hell do we think we are that we can solve this problem?”

Mr. Khalilzad would be the first to acknowledge that Afghanistan was always fractious politically, and that there were assassinations and coups even during the era of relative peace. But the current downward spiral did not begin until 1978, when the president, Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan, was killed in a Communist coup, setting off three decades of conflict.

In 1979, the Soviets invaded, occupied Afghanistan for the next decade and were finally driven out by American-backed mujahedeen fighters, some of whom went on to form the Taliban, an Islamic student militia, which took control in Kabul in 1996. The Taliban in turn were toppled by the Americans in 2001, but fighting continued.

And by the end of the 1970s, many of the educated elite had fled and resettled across Europe, Asia and the United States. Gone with them was the promise of those earlier decades, when Kabul solicited foreign aid from both Washington and Moscow that brought in electricity, dams and irrigation, and when a young Parliament was trying out a fledgling democracy.

“There was definitely what was developing to be a newer tradition of a more open society and trained people” in those earlier years, said Paula Newberg, director of Georgetown University’s Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, who was an adviser to President Hamid Karzai’s government in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2004.

J. Alexander Thier, an expert on Afghanistan at the United States Institute of Peace who lived in the country during the takeover by the Taliban in the 1990s, said that some Afghans returned to the country after 2002, but that many still lived abroad. He said he was not “incredibly optimistic” about Afghanistan after eight years of the current war, but that he supported robust reconstruction aid and American help to bolster regional governments throughout the country. “I lived in Afghanistan in the absolute darkest days, when if Afghanistan was ever going to break apart into separate states, it would have happened,” he said. Now, he said, “the alternatives are so much more bleak and dangerous for us that we do need to keep trying.”

Frederick W. Kagan, a military expert at the American Enterprise Institute, made a related point: “Our enemies,” he said, “believe that Afghanistan is governable in its current state, because that’s what they’re trying to do.”

For now, administration officials say that much of the debate in the Situation Room is centered on whether the United States should focus less on the weak central Afghan government or put more money and effort into the provinces, where warlords have traditionally ruled. “We shouldn’t worry so much about Karzai, we should worry about empowering the governors and getting better district chiefs and police chiefs,” said a senior State Department official.

“I think Afghanistan is governable,” the official said, “but the question is at what level?”